

# Belgium's Mid-Twentieth Century Crisis: Crisis of a Nation-State?

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When was Belgium? Nations, as historians are rightly at pains to emphasise, are not eternal entities but communities bounded by time as well as space.<sup>1</sup> The temporal boundaries of the Belgian nation have been the subject of debate since at least the time of Pirenne, but that debate has acquired a new prominence in recent years as older and newer generations of historians have focused their attention on the origins, contours and eventual crises of the Belgian nation-state (Morelli, 1995; Wils, 1995; Deprez & Vos, 1998; Stengers, 2000; Stengers & Gubin, 2002). The reasons for this renewed interest are not difficult to discern. The profound, and probably incomplete, transformation of Belgium into a federal or confederal entity since the end of the 1960s has for the first time made the Belgian nation-state a finite and therefore emphatically historical subject. Though political scientists rightly continue to investigate the manifold complexities (and future prospects) of the contemporary Belgian polity (e.g. Delwit, 2003), it seems undeniable that the project that was the Belgian nation-state now possesses not only a beginning and a heyday but also an end. For historians of post-1830 Belgium, this should be regarded as a liberation. Instead of being called upon to provide their expert testimony at the interminable trials of the late twentieth-century Belgian state, they are free to investigate the dynamics that gave rise to that state and which sustained it over the more than one hundred years of its existence. In sum, they finally have a subject that is fully their own.

The first fruits of this renewed historiographical interest in the Belgian nation-state have been evident in the attention devoted to nineteenth-century politics, and in particular to the complex question of how close a connection existed between the process of state-building and the creation of a sense of national identity. Was Belgium, as Jean Stengers was inclined to argue, a nascent national community which after 1830 acquired the institutional architecture of a modern state? Or, as Lode Wils and more regionally-minded Flemish and Walloon historians assert, was Belgium an essentially circumstantial creation, a product of the convergence of international politics and

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<sup>1</sup> For stimulating comparative perspectives see Williams (1985), Sayer (1998) and the recent study of French Flanders by Baycroft (2004).

the internal development of an industrial and commercial bourgeoisie (Stengers, 2000, 7-28; Wils, 2003)? These are questions on which reasonable-minded historians can, and will no doubt long continue to, differ. But, alongside this interest in the origins and nineteenth-century trajectory of the Belgian nation-state, so there needs to be an equivalent examination of how and when these processes of state and nation building encountered difficulties. Recent work on the inter-war years has convincingly demonstrated the rich culture of Belgian patriotism which existed around the moment of the state's centenary. Tensions of social class and linguistic difference notwithstanding, Belgian patriotism had an essentially syncretic character, incorporating local identities and the different world-views of the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal pillars into an inclusive patriotism which alienated a few but enveloped the many.<sup>2</sup> The resilience of this culture of "Belgianness" through and well beyond the upheavals of the Second World War only serves to render more difficult the challenge of explaining why Belgium should ever have gone away. There was no obvious or pre-determined reason why the crisis of the nation-state should have occurred, and to explain that historical process is much more complex than to trace the withering away of the artificial carapace of the Belgian state and its replacement by the linguistically defined communities of Wallonia and Flanders.<sup>3</sup>

In understanding, this turning of the tide, the period between 1930 and 1950 has an evident centrality. '30-'50 has become the chronological framework within which contemporary historians have come to approach the multi-layered crises which Belgium experienced between the onset of the economic depression and the *dénouement* of the royal question in 1950-1951.<sup>4</sup> This wider approach has many merits, not least the way in which, more so than is currently the case for the First World War, it has enabled historians to integrate the history of the German Occupation of 1940-1944 into medium-term narratives of political, social and cultural change.<sup>5</sup> Seen from this perspective,

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<sup>2</sup> See notably the valuable studies of van Ypersele (1995), Schwarzenbach (1999, especially 258-262) and Tixhon & van Ypersele (2000).

<sup>3</sup> What one might describe as a "post-Belgian historiography" tends to dismiss Belgian nationalism and to focus on the ineluctable rise of what Maarten Van Ginderachter has described as "the national movements" of Wallonia and Flanders: e.g. Van Ginderachter (2001, 75). For a critique of such an approach, see Kesteloot (1997).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the title of the periodical of the CEGES/SOMA (Centre d'études et de documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines/Studie- en Documentatiecentrum oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij) in Brussels: *Bulletin de nouvelles '30-'50/Berichtenblad '30-'50*.

<sup>5</sup> The excellent account of the first German Occupation of Belgium between 1914 and 1918 by Sophie De Schaepdrijver (1997) is in this respect notable for the way in which it adopts a "classical" focus on the four years of Occupation very different from much recent writing on the subsequent Occupation.

the wartime choices of accommodation, resistance and collaboration were not free-standing actions but manifestations of political and ideological tensions already evident during the 1930s and which would only be settled, though not entirely resolved, in the period of essentially conservative re-stabilisation that took place between the first post-war elections in 1946 and the abdication of Leopold III in the summer of 1951.

Within this fruitful re-conceptualisation of Belgium's mid-century history, the question of how far, if at all, one should relate the crises of the 1930s and 1940s to the longer-term problems of the nation-state has, however, remained somewhat muted. This is not surprising. The outcome of the upheavals of the mid-century decades was determinedly ambivalent. On the one hand, it is all too tempting to present these years as constituting the first act in the progressive disintegration of Belgium that would gather pace from the 1960s onwards. Yet, on the other hand, it is undeniable that the re-founding of the state that took place after the liberation of 1944 brought an apparent end to many of the forms of instability that had undermined the Belgian polity over the preceding years. The difficult task that confronts historians studying the 1930s and the 1940s is not to choose between these different perspectives but to combine them in ways that enable us to perceive more exactly how the events of those years may have contributed to the subsequent difficulties of the nation-state.

The purpose of this article is not to provide an answer to that complex historical problem. Instead, its more modest goal is to suggest various avenues of enquiry that emerge from recent historical research and which would seem deserving of further exploration.<sup>6</sup> In doing so, it is perhaps best to begin by defining what we are trying to explain. Expressed rather schematically, the crisis of the viability of the Belgian nation-state as it developed over the second half of the twentieth century was a three-layered process. Firstly, and most obviously, it was a problem of national identity, or more exactly of the gap that opened up between a cultural sense of "Belgianness", with which much of the population remained comfortable, and the more formal trappings of Belgium, from which significant minorities in the north and south became alienated. Secondly, therefore, it was also a problem of state structures, whereby the constitutional and institutional definition of Belgium inherited from the nineteenth century no longer seemed adequate to resolve the politi-

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<sup>6</sup> This article forms part of a larger project on the immediate post-war history of Belgium on which I am engaged. It would be highly misleading for me to suggest that the ideas presented here are of my own invention. They owe much to discussions with Emmanuel Gerard, José Gotovitch, Pieter Lagrou and Dirk Martin among others. The responsibility for the development of them here is, however, entirely mine.

cal and social divisions inherent to a highly capitalist and ideologically and regionally segmented society. Finally, it was the erosion of a particular political culture of power-sharing and compromise which had united the principal social and political actors within the Belgian polity since the end of the nineteenth century. The consequence of this three-fold process was not some sudden or still less violent explosion, but rather a gradual tipping of the balance from centripetal to centrifugal factors. There was no decisive break between the processes of unification and disintegration; indeed, in many respects the forces that had formerly brought the heterogeneous elements of the Belgian polity together were the same that subsequently began to distance those elements from each other.<sup>7</sup>

The first of these three processes, the problem of national identity, is perhaps the most difficult to relate to the events of the 1930s and 1940s. Separatist, or anti-Belgian, nationalisms were among the principal losers of Belgium's mid-century crisis. In so far as the emergence of the *Vlaams Nationaal Verbond* (VNV) as an electoral force during the 1930s had reflected the Flemish nationalism prevalent among a significant section of the Catholic intelligentsia in Flanders (De Wever, 1994), the party's subsequent decision to ally itself with the German occupying forces condemned that separatist aspiration to the political margins after 1944. The ethno-centric, Romantic and Catholic rhetoric that had characterised Flemish nationalism since the end of the nineteenth century largely disappeared, and the new Flemish movement which emerged from the 1960s onwards adopted a different and less nationalist language of linguistic and civil rights. In southern Belgium, a distinct *wallingant* politics emerged for the first time in the immediate aftermath of liberation, most notably at the first *Congrès National Wallon* held in Liège in October 1945. That congress served, however, to demonstrate the weakness of anything that might be defined as Walloon nationalism. Behind its essentially Liègeois character and famous call for re-unification with France, the real driving force of the Congress was the grievances felt by a section of the southern political elite at regional economic decline and the perceived ascendancy of Flemish interests within Brussels decision-making. Only in the 1960s did these grievances develop a mass audience and a more tangible definition of Wallonia as a regional political community (Raxhon, 1995; Kesteloot, 2002, 366).

In contrast, the 1940s undoubtedly marked one of the periodic high-points in the rather discontinuous history of Belgian nationalism during the twenti-

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<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps significant that we still lack a satisfying single account of the political evolution of Belgium since the Second World War. The best are Witte & Craeybeckx (1987) and Mabilie (2000). Both, however, limit themselves largely to a detailed political chronology.

eth century. To state that four years of resented German Occupation led to a marked rise in patriotic sentiments might seem a dangerously fatuous statement. It is, however, a point that all too often tends to be overlooked. The effusions of flag-waving *tricolore* patriotism that accompanied Allied liberation in 1944 were perhaps too ephemeral to have any great political significance. But it is impossible to ignore the patriotic spirit which suffused all areas of Belgian life in the post-war years. The war, it was felt, had been a collective test of the qualities of the Belgian people, and one from which they had emerged morally victorious. Now the task was not merely to purge the country of those "mauvais belges" who had failed the tests of the war years but to build in the words of one Gent Resistance newspaper "een beter, een schoner, en gelukkiger Vaderland".<sup>8</sup> More significant than the fact of this patriotism was the form that it took. Belgian patriotism of the inter-war years had remained within the rather constraining scaffolding of Albertine monarchism and commemoration of the heroes and victims of the First World War (van Ypersele, 1995; 1997). That which emerged after the Second World War in contrast was more democratic and inclusive in spirit and more forward-looking in ambition. It focused less on Belgium than on the Belgians, and less on loyalty to the nation than on the collective solidarity which united all Belgians regardless of their linguistic, social or ideological identities. As the Socialist commentator Victor Larock observed, the war had demonstrated "l'attachement irréductible à notre indépendance et à nos libertés individuelles".<sup>9</sup> Belgium was, according to this widely-shared account, a historic national community united by values of freedom which rejected instinctively alien rule or any attempt to impose dictatorship.

To attach too much significance to the sense of "Belgianness" that emerged during and after the Second World War would clearly be mistaken. Patriotic unity was an all too convenient form of political discourse after the divisions of the war years, and one that was readily exploited by Van Acker and other governmental leaders to justify the material hardships of reconstruction.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the intense controversy generated during the post-war years by the past actions and future status of King Leopold III demonstrated how profoundly the Belgians could be divided not merely over the status of

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<sup>8</sup> *Het Belfort* 28 Oct. 1944, p. 1, "De Keure van het Onafhankelijkheidsfront".

<sup>9</sup> *Le Peuple* 20 Apr. 1945, p. 1, "Le sentiment public sous l'occupation". See also *De Nieuwe Standaard* 22-23 Apr. 1945, p. 1, "Waarom zouden wij voor elkander vreezen?"; *Vers l'Avenir* 6 Sept. 1945, p. 1, "Rêves d'hier et réalités d'aujourd'hui".

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the speeches given by Van Acker on 23 Sept. and 31 Dec. 1945, Rijksarchief Brugge, Van Acker papers, Dossier 427. I gratefully acknowledge the permission of Michel Nuytens to consult these papers.

an individual but over the very character of their political community. Nevertheless, the passions aroused by the issue of the King also served to demonstrate the strength of patriotic discourse in Belgium. The royal question acquired such emotional importance for many of Leopold's supporters and opponents because it was in many respects not simply a political or constitutional struggle but a conflict about the symbolic trappings of Belgium.

It would therefore be misleading to suggest that there was anything inherently weak about the Belgian patriotism of the mid-century decades. Regional and, more especially, municipal and communal loyalties remained strong, but these generally co-existed alongside a sense of "Belgianness", rather than conflicting with it.<sup>11</sup> If, however, there is a connection between this mid-century nationalism and the subsequent problems of the nation-state, it lies in the political and institutional implications of this patriotism. The vision of Belgian history, derived at several steps removed from Pirenne, as a story of obstinate resistance to foreign oppression combined easily with a somewhat complacent vision of the existing political structure. Belgium, according to this account, had achieved in 1830 not only independence but a more profound freedom, which was incarnated in the liberal parliamentary regime. Thus, in marked contrast to the plans for authoritarian reforms that had flourished in the 1930s, celebration of the virtues of the existing political order became almost universal after the war. Everybody from the Communists to the *Christelijke Volkspartij-Parti Social Chrétien* (CVP-PSC) seemed newly united in their praise of a political regime that had proved to be adapted to the peculiar temperament of the Belgian people. This change was particularly marked in Catholic ranks. While it had been commonplace before the war to denounce the failures of the parliamentary system, such critiques were confined after the war to a few unconditional Leopoldists. The founding programme of the CVP-PSC made scarcely any mention of political reform, and the influential *Relève* group was typical of post-war Catholic political attitudes in its defence of the constitution as the expression of the "traditions essentielles et... constantes historiques de notre peuple".<sup>12</sup>

The interconnectedness between this "mythe identitaire et unitaire" and the established political order contributed to the rigidity of state structures which formed the second component of the subsequent problems of the nation-

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<sup>11</sup> For a somewhat nostalgic evocation of the local culture of Belgianness in the post-war era, see Sante (1998).

<sup>12</sup> *La Relève* May 1945, pp. 1-2, "Présentation". See also *Les Dossiers de l'Action Sociale Catholique* Mar. 1945, p. 20, "L'Idéal Démocratique" and the comments in Molitor (1984, 202).

state.<sup>13</sup> The absence of any major political or constitutional reform (exempting the enfranchisement of women in 1948) in the half-century between the institution of simple manhood suffrage after the First World War and the regional reforms of the 1970s distinguished Belgium from most other European states and contributed to the sense of an increasing distance between state and society. Once again, there seems no inevitability to this immobility. Plans for major political reforms had proliferated across the political spectrum during the mid- and late 1930s and, had the military and diplomatic circumstances proved different, could easily have given rise to a New Order political regime after the defeat of 1940 (Gérard-Libois & Gotovitch, 1971, 200-215). After the war, however, any notion of a restructuring of the state disappeared from governing circles. Indeed, when the Liègeois political scientist François Perin published his influential tract *La démocratie enrayée* in 1960 which denounced the immobility and ineffectiveness of the Belgian political system his views, which would have been commonplace in the 1930s, appeared almost shocking in their novelty (Perin, 1960).

In part, the absence of state reform was due to the sense of crisis that engulfed all sections of the political and administrative elite, and their British mentors, in the immediate aftermath of the liberation of 1944. Nowhere else in northern Europe was the absence of tangible structures of governmental and police authority more tangibly felt than in Belgium, as was evident in the mood of elite panic provoked by the Communist-influenced demonstrations outside parliament in November 1944.<sup>14</sup> Unsurprisingly, therefore, the priority for the Van Acker governments of 1945 and 1946 was reconstruction rather than reform. Their central ambition, amidst the tumult of Resistance actions, Leopoldist and anti-Leopoldist street demonstrations, sudden strike waves and simple lawlessness, was to re-establish what they regarded as the necessary pre-eminence of state over society (Conway, 2000; Witte, 2000). By the time of the departure of the Communists from government and the consequent creation of the Spaak-Eyskens Socialist-Catholic government in the spring of 1947 that goal had been essentially achieved. Belgium had been disciplined into a mould acceptable to the Western Allies as a respectable if rather staid participant in the institutions of West European military and economic co-operation. To borrow the apposite words of Alan Milward, the Bel-

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<sup>13</sup>. The words are those of Laurence van Ypersele regarding the cult of King Albert I (van Ypersele, 1997, 15).

<sup>14</sup>. See, for example, the diary of the British ambassador to Belgium: Sir Hughe Knatchbull-Hugessen Diary 25-28 Nov. 1944, Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge, KNAT 1/14. I gratefully acknowledge the permission of the Archivist of Churchill College to consult these papers. See also Warner (1978).

gian nation-state did indeed appear to have been saved (Lagrou, 1997, 133-136; Milward, 1992).

That achievement was first and foremost the work of the new generation of essentially pragmatic Catholic and Socialist politicians who came to the fore after the war. The division between the Catholic, Socialist and Liberal pillars has long been pointed to by political scientists as one of the essentially unchanging verities of Belgium over the twentieth century (e.g. Huyse, 1971). This emphasis on continuity should not, however, distract attention from the major, almost revolutionary, changes that took place within Belgian politics during the 1930s and 1940s. The Liberal Party was reduced to a secondary participant in the political game. The VNV, the Rexists and the largely Catholic *Union Démocratique Belge* (UDB) all came and went; the Communists similarly came and almost entirely went. The Catholic Party, profoundly divided by internal and external dissidence in the 1930s, rediscovered after the war a political unity around the new slogan of Christian Democracy. The *Parti Socialiste Belge/Belgische Socialistische Partij* (PSB/BSP), which had struggled to maintain any viable existence during the war years, used its powerful position within the post-liberation governments to rebuild its party structures and re-establish its grip over the trade unions and its industrial heartlands. Above all, the mid-century crisis forged a new bi-polar political system, in which by 1958 more than four out of five votes (82%) were cast for either the PSB/BSP or the CVP-PSC (Luykx & Platel, 1985, 964). These two parties, and their numerous affiliated organisations, were the twin poles of what one might term the Third Belgian State, which replaced the tripartite structure of mass politics that had itself succeeded the nineteenth-century notable parliamentary world after the First World War.

This Third Belgian State had many strengths. Once the question of Leopold III had been resolved in 1950, the leaders of both parties fitted easily into their roles as the alternate managers of a Belgian polity which, if it never participated fully in the European economic miracle of the post-war decades, had overcome the imminent economic and political crises that had appeared to threaten its dissolution during the 1930s and 1940s. But, behind the self-confident image projected by the Brussels Exhibition of 1958 as well as the reassuring familiarity of the Catholic-secular disputes of the *guerre scolaire* of the 1950s, the issue of state reform remained largely unresolved. Neither the much-vaunted novelty of the Christian Democrat ideology of the CVP-PSC nor the *de facto* reformism of the PSB/BSP, new in title but largely unchanged in mentality, proved to be effective vehicles for rethinking the basis of the Belgian political community. That this should have been so owed much to the way that the crises of the 1930s and 1940s had reinforced the



conservative reflexes of the two major political traditions. This was perhaps most obvious in the case of the Socialists. De Man's decision in 1940 to pursue some form of *modus vivendi* with the German occupiers deprived reformist currents within Socialism of much of their already limited strength, and reinforced the anti-ideological instincts of those, such as Max Buset and Achille Van Acker, who dominated the post-war party. Henceforth, those within the PSB/BSP such as Paul-Henri Spaak who retained aspirations to rethink the frontiers and content of Belgian Socialism were required to work within the dominant obedience to the Charter of Quaregnon and the untheoretical reformism that it permitted. Above all, there was the threat posed by the Communists. The Communist Party had emerged from the multiple trials of the war years sufficiently threatening to dominate the private political calculations of the PSB/BSP leaders, but insufficiently powerful to challenge, outside of a few localised power-bases, the Socialist hegemony, either in elections or within the trade unions (Gotovitch, 1992, 455-457; Hemmerijckx, 2003, 169-213). Consequently, the Communists proved to be the unwitting assistants in the reconstruction of the Socialist pillar. The party, the trade unions and the welfare organisations were all tools in the concerted Socialist strategy of re-conquering its political territory from the Communists at the expense of any wider re-thinking of its political goals or ideological inspiration.<sup>15</sup>

This priority of securing their own territory was also evident in Catholic ranks. Much has been rightly made of the way in which the CVP-PSC marked a new departure for Catholic politics in Belgium (e.g. Van den Wijngaert, 1976; Lamberts, 2001). In terms of their organisation and ideology, and perhaps most especially the composition of their leadership cadre, the twin Flemish and francophone parties marked a decisive caesura with the Catholic Party that had encountered such difficulties in the inter-war years. Yet, these innovations only proved possible because of the wider circumstances favouring the re-emergence of a united Catholic political movement. The wartime demise of the Rexists and the Flemish Nationalists was important in this respect. But perhaps more durably important was the way in which the war years fostered a re-unification in Catholic ranks against the threats posed initially by German Occupation but subsequently by Communist Resistance and fears of a post-war revival of anti-clerical secularism. Encouraged by the guarded but unmistakable warnings of Cardinal Van Roey against any form of political adventurism (as represented, notably, by the

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<sup>15</sup>. We lack a major study of the Socialist Party at this crucial point in its history. See however Kramer (1978), Desama (1985) and Kesteloot (1994). This is a field where further research is very much needed.

UDB), the priority was therefore to re-build a strong confessional party capable of defending Catholic interests. The rapid emergence of the CVP-PSC during 1945 and its emphatic success in the elections of February 1946 was proof of how strongly the mood within Catholic ranks, reinforced by the *question royale* and the consequent departure of the Catholic ministers from government in the summer of 1945, had moved in favour of confessional unity. Thus, as some of the more reform-minded figures within the CVP-PSC were all too aware, its electoral success was too emphatic. By essentially gathering together almost all of the inter-war electorate of the Catholic pillar, it ensured that the new party would be more Catholic than Christian Democrat. Thus, although its leaders rather skilfully avoided committing themselves unconditionally to the Leopoldist cause, there was no way for it to avoid the ties of confessional solidarity. The party's structures reflected its rootedness in the social and economic organisations of the Catholic pillar, which in turn defined the content of its policies (Conway, 1996, 205-213; Van den Wijngaert, 1999; Maerten, 1999; Pasture, 1996, 265-266; Kwanten, 2001, 297-334).

The conservative logic of the two major parties, and the pillarised social frontiers which secured their dominant position, imposed a constraining framework on the political order. Put simply, the two parties were both cause and effect of the immobility of the post-war political system. This was, of course, neither surprising nor novel. The Belgian polity, as it had gradually taken shape in the mid-nineteenth century, had derived much of its stability from its largely successful incorporation of Liberalism, Catholicism and, eventually, Socialism within a complex system of multi-lateral brokerage. This was, indeed, in many respects the Belgian way of doing politics (e.g. Meynaud *et al*, 1965; Jones, 1995, 153-155; Strikwerda, 1997, 401-419). What therefore is distinctive about the era after 1945 is not the existence of a pillarised structure of politics but that the forms of compromise and co-existence which it encouraged should not have been able to provide political stability. Instead, the very persistence of the pillarised political communities became the third strand of the problems encountered by the Belgian nation-state. This was largely a consequence of the disconcerting rapidity of the socio-economic and cultural changes of the 1950s and 1960s. The demise within a couple of decades of much of the heavy industry of southern Belgium and the equally rapid development of new forms of industry in Flanders as well as the internal transformation that took place within Catholicism from the 1960s onwards were all factors that destabilised the Belgian polity. They provided the political and social space for the emergence of new regionalist movements, which in turn accelerated the transformation of the CVP and the

francophone *Parti Socialiste* into parties not of national government but of regional interest.

But, here again, the perspective of the mid-century decades also has a role to play. The economic crisis of the 1930s and the intense but unequal material sufferings of the war years brought about a re-ordering of the relations between classes and regions within Belgium. In particular, the prolonged economic depression and the political and economic oppression brought about by the German Occupation did much to destroy the social and political coherence of the industrial working class of southern Belgium. Mass unemployment, military conscription (and, for many, detention in German prisoner-of-war camps) civilian labour conscription to work in Germany and persecution of political militants as well as Allied bombing and the manifold hardships of wartime urban life were all factors which ensured that the Walloon working class was a more volatile but also less powerful force after the Second World War. New structures of industrial corporatism introduced during the latter 1940s gave trade-union officials for the first time a clear place at the negotiating table with both employers and state bureaucrats (Luyten, 1995, 123-156). But the members upon whom their new-found status rested were, as the events of the *grève du siècle* in 1960-1961 subsequently demonstrated, much less inclined to follow their leadership. The ambition of an incremental but remorseless advance towards power that had sustained Socialist militants since the end of the nineteenth century was replaced by a grim rearguard struggle against the logic of industrial obsolescence and consequent capitalist retrenchment (Neuville & Yerna, 1990). In contrast, the upheavals of the 1930s and the 1940s broadly favoured the material interests of rural and small-town Belgium. Thus, while the right-wing protest movements of the 1930s had drawn deeply on the resentments of farmers and small businessmen against the state, these groups were among those whom the policies of the post-war governments were most clearly intended to protect (Van Molle, 1990, 344-350; Timperman, 1998; Heyrman, 1991, 191-194; Heyrman *et al.*, 1994).

Social changes went hand in hand with a shift in regional dynamics. The Belgium of 1950, in comparison with that of 1930, was much more northern-oriented in its mentality and in the recruitment of its elites. Issues of linguistic discrimination, indeed, acquired such a prominence in the post-war decades because in many respects they were at odds with the transfer of power that had taken place during the 1930s and 1940s from francophone to Flemish elites. The Flemish Nationalist "capture" of the Belgian state during the Second World War proved short-lived; but the impotent pretensions of Romée and his VNV colleagues were succeeded by the more durable entry of a

new generation of Flemish (and Dutch-speaking) political and administrative figures into leadership positions. Untainted by wartime collaboration, men such as Gaston Eyskens and August De Schryver combined political pragmatism and administrative competence (Eyskens, 1993; Kwanten, 2001). Their ascendancy was, however, felt keenly and magnified disproportionately by those in Wallonia who felt excluded from the governing circles of the Belgian state. The bitterness provoked in the southern industrial cities, such as Liège, by the efforts of Leopold III to regain his powers as monarch can only be understood in the context of the new-found awareness of their minority status which spread through the Walloon political elite after the Second World War. Dreams of re-unification with France or of Walloon independence might have remained far outside the realm of practical politics, but a widely-felt sense of victimhood encouraged the development of *wallingant* political movements and, perhaps most profoundly, brought about the gradual disengagement during the 1960s and 1970s of francophone political leaders from national political life.<sup>16</sup>

Seen from the perspective of the later difficulties of the Belgian nation-state, the social changes of the 1930s and 1940s therefore have a double-edged character. They helped to underpin the re-stabilisation of the political order after 1944, bringing for the first time an authentic voice of the Flemish majority, the CVP, to the centre of political power. At the same time, however, the shifts in social and regional power created new tensions that contributed to what one might term the gradual disaggregation of national politics over the post-war decades. The sense among Walloon workers that their interests were not being adequately represented in Belgian policy-making was soon joined by the grievances of a new Flemish bourgeoisie who rejected as inadequate the limited moves towards linguistic equality introduced by national governments. The constellation of linguistic and regional grievances that gradually came to dominate politics during the 1960s were not in themselves insoluble within the structures of the nation-state (Witte & Van Velthoven, 1999). Indeed, compared with the problems faced by the state's rulers over the preceding decades, they were in many respects less immediately threatening. But the failure to negotiate successful compromise solutions to these problems was indicative of the wider erosion of the "consociational and

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<sup>16</sup> Contemporary commentaries on the "malaise wallon" in 1945 were legion. See, for characteristic examples: *La Revue Nouvelle* 1 Feb. 1945, p. 23, "La situation politique"; *Indépendance* 13 Apr. 1945, p. 1, "Les griefs des Wallons"; *Le Monde du Travail* 4 May 1945, p. 1, "Les Positions wallonnes". Francophone disengagement is well illustrated by the later careers of Paul-Henri Spaak in NATO and of Jean Duvieusart in the European Parliament (Dumoulin, 1999; Dujardin, 2000).

corporatist mix" (Jones, 2000, 3) which had long provided Belgium with its essential stability. In moments of national crisis, as was proved in very different ways during the summers of 1940 and 1950, Belgian political leaders had long placed a pragmatic sense of the national interest above the achievement of sectional goals. This instinctive solidarity, rooted in the shared parliamentary culture of the Chamber of Representatives and the quotidian negotiation of compromises in municipal and national politics (Beyen & Röttger, 2003, especially 382-383), was, however, a waning force after the Second World War. The unity of the national political class was undermined by the bitter political disputes of the 1930s and 1940s as well as by the increasingly regional recruitment and mentality of the CVP and the franco-phone Socialists. Threatened externally by new electoral rivals and internally by new militant voices, the leaders of the two parties which had rebuilt the unitary nation-state after the Second World War had become by the 1980s the principal agents of its replacement by a federal structure (Hooghe, 1991). In that sense, the most profound problem confronted by Belgium was that it no longer possessed a ruling class whose interests converged with those of the nation-state (Gotovitch, 2002, 376-377).

In this respect, as with the other themes touched upon in this article, the changes that took place within the mid-century decades would appear to have had a considerable impact on subsequent developments. By reordering the hierarchies of language, of community and most importantly of class, the upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s disrupted the structures of negotiation and compromise that had long provided one of the central elements of the resilience of Belgian political culture. This is not of course to suggest that *all* of the subsequent problems of the nation-state can be traced back to the events of the mid-century years. As historical research on the 1960s and 1970s develops, so we shall no doubt develop a more sophisticated understanding of the dynamics specific to that era. But it does perhaps serve to indicate how the difficulties of the latter decades of the twentieth century cannot be viewed in isolation from the events of the preceding era. Indeed, perhaps what is most distinctive about the Belgian nation-state *as a historical phenomenon* is the way in which its problems seem inseparable from its success. In making this point, the focus also moves somewhat from nation to state. Viewed through the prism of the mid-century decades, the origins of the crisis of the Belgian nation-state appear to lie primarily in the rigidities of the state and of political structures rather than in the collapse of Belgium as a form of national identity. The emergence in the 1960s of Flemish and Walloon regional nationalisms which defined themselves against the Belgian monolith was not so much the culmination of a century-long process of (proto-)nationalist

maturation as the product of tensions created by the political mould within which Belgium had come to be defined from the 1930s onwards.

This longer historical perspective must also raise the question of the inevitability of the difficulties encountered by the nation-state. The contrast between the twentieth-century history of Belgium and, say, that of Switzerland suggests that not all multi-lingual European nation-states were doomed to extinction, just as the regional tensions evident in recent decades in, for example, Spain and Italy have made the problems of Belgium appear less distinctive than was formerly the case (e.g. Ginsborg, 2001, 174-178, 305-307). The purpose of such comparisons is not to suggest facetiously that, had events somehow worked out differently, the travails of the Belgian nation-state might have been deferred or simply avoided. But, as with any such complex historical process, it is possible to identify those factors that caused events to take a particular course. Three aspects of the mid-century years appear in particular to have had important consequences for Belgium's subsequent history. Firstly, the various challenges to the established political order which developed strongly from the mid-1930s onwards all served ultimately to weaken the prospect of political or constitutional change. The various blue-prints for "top-down" political reform advocated during the 1930s were discredited by their partial implementation by the German occupiers and their New Order allies from the autumn of 1940 onwards. Consequently, putative reformers were left without a cause to espouse after 1944, and the projects of institutional reform developed during the German Occupation in London or in the various elite discussion groups within Belgium remained almost entirely unimplemented (Henau, 1990; Grosbois, 1994). Similarly, any possibility of a significant devolution of power to the linguistic communities or even to the provinces, was excluded by the "treasonable" collaboration of Flemish Nationalists, and to a lesser extent the pro-French gestures of the post-war Walloon activists. Instead, Belgium's definition as a political community was firmly enshrined in fidelity to the centralised parliamentary regime established by the 1831 Constitution.<sup>17</sup> Finally, aspirations for an overdue "New Deal" to address the social inequalities created by more than a century of largely untrammelled capitalist industrialisation remained largely unfulfilled. The strikes and other social protests of the 1930s and the new forms of "grass-roots" trade-union organisation that developed during the Occupation as well as the strike waves of the later 1940s were all expressions of this demand for social change. They, however, resulted only in the limited

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<sup>17</sup> The rigidity of the post-war political structure is well demonstrated by the marginalisation of the timid gestures towards reform which gave rise to the so-called Centre Harmel established by parliament in 1948 to discuss the Flemish and Walloon issues (Martin, 1989).

measures of social-security legislation introduced in December 1944, and in the conservative stabilisation of industrial relations institutionalised in the corporatist structures of the late 1940s.<sup>18</sup> Advocates of more far-reaching social reform, such as the exponents of a Catholic-inspired social order, the labour militants active in trade-union groupings such as André Renard's *Mouvement Syndical Unifié* or those drawn by the events of the war to the Communist Party, saw their hopes dissipated as the grand rhetoric of liberation gave way to normalisation within the ideological limits imposed by Cold War politics (e.g. Jadoulle, 2001; Hemmerijckx, 1990; 1994).

Secondly, the real victors of the mid-century years proved not to be the King, the Resistance, or even the London government-in-exile but the members of the pre-war political and social elite who, as Els Witte and others have well argued, had had an unheroic and largely uncommitted war (Witte, 1989, 14-25; Van Doorslaer, 1995). The leaders of the Socialist, Catholic and Liberal political and social organisations, the major industrialists, the Church hierarchy and the bureaucrats of the state and para-statal institutions were not (on the whole) unprincipled compromisers, but they were adept at bending with the changing winds of military and political fortune. Gestures of adaptation to the New Order in 1940 gradually gave way to accommodation with the London government and the Allied authorities, as well as timely patronage of the Resistance groups within Belgium (e.g. Dantoing, 1991). The logic of their actions was always focused instinctively on the protection of their positions of power rather than the implementation of change. When these institutional elites fell out, as they did most obviously in the post-war years over issues such as the prosecution of wartime collaborators or the future status of the King, opportunities for more radical change briefly appeared. But, these moments of crisis excepted, the more durable outcome of the challenges of the 1940s was the consolidation of a sense of common purpose among Belgium's elites, which in turn was reflected in the reconstruction of a largely unchanged Belgian state and the informal culture of elite negotiation that had long surrounded it.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>. The socio-economic compromises of the immediate post-war years have rightly been the subject of considerable study in recent years. See notably Pasture (1993) and Luyten & Vanthemsche (1995). Much of this has demonstrated how the social and economic legislation of the 1940s needs to be seen not so much as a demonstration of working-class power but as a consequence of the emergence of a new mood among certain employers combined with the determination of the state bureaucracy to impose forums for negotiation on the social partners. See notably Luyten (1995, 97-122), Luyten & Hemmerijck (2000) and Deleeck (2000).

<sup>19</sup>. As Perin warned in his 1960 tract: "A la longue, l'immobilisme ne peut se pratiquer impunément" (Perin, 1960, 141). The costs of immobility were perhaps most evident in the economic sphere (e.g. Milward, 1992, 117; Mommen, 1994, 75-98).

Thirdly, and finally, the upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s had the effect of reinforcing the position of the pillarised institutions that had long been a prominent element of Belgian social and political life. In moments of crisis, notably in the aftermath of the military defeat of 1940, the structures of pillarisation split apart, but the indirect rule imposed by the German and Allied military authorities in wartime Belgium provided a favourable environment for the recovery of their role as influential intermediaries between Belgian citizens and their rulers. Conversely, new forms of political organisation that operated outside of these pillarised structures did not prosper. The various *travailleuse* initiatives of the post-war years, such as the UDB, and the efforts of the Resistance *Front de l'Indépendance/Onafhankelijkheidsfront* (FI/OF) to project its political ambitions beyond the liberation of the national territory failed to attract a mass audience, and either withered away or were obliged to negotiate their re-entry into one of the pillars.<sup>20</sup> Undoubtedly the most important outcome of this process was the neutralisation of the Communist Party. It had appeared destined in 1944 to play a powerful role in Belgian politics; yet, within less than a decade, it had been reduced to a peripheral position both in electoral terms and within the labour movement. This owed something to the actions of the Communists themselves, whose pursuit of a popular front with the Socialists during the post-liberation years appears unduly optimistic, but also much to the way in which, long before the Cold War began to make itself felt, the Communists were regarded by the other political groups as essentially illegitimate participants in the political process.<sup>21</sup> Successful re-pillarisation was not necessarily a source of instability in the short-term. Particularly within Catholic ranks, the re-consolidation that occurred during and after the war enabled, as we have seen, a predominantly new generation of political leaders to come to the fore. But the constraints imposed by a pillarised polity became evident during the post-war decades as the rapidity of social and economic change created a disjuncture between the political movements and the social realities they claimed to represent. The twin consequences were the emergence of dissident currents within each pillar and of regionally or linguistically-defined movements which operated largely outside the pillarised structure.

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<sup>20</sup> Regarding the marginalisation of the FI/OF during 1945, see: *La Cité Nouvelle* 20 Feb. 1945, p. 1, "Le Congrès du Front de l'Indépendance"; *Le Perron* 15 Sept. 1945, p. 1, "L'Union"; *Het Belfort* 16 Sept. 1945, p. 1, "Onze taak". For the UDB, see notably Beerten (1990).

<sup>21</sup> For characteristic examples of anti-Communist statements by Socialist leaders, see: "Note pour la reconstitution du Parti Socialiste" 10 Feb. 1943, p. 1, CEGES/SOMA, PD/8 Document 10; and Buset and Van Acker at *Bureau* of PSB/BSP 31 July 1946 and De Sweemer at *Conseil Général* of PSB/BSP 14 June 1947, Institut Emile Vandervelde, Brussels.



All three of these themes therefore well demonstrate the double-headed nature of the problems raised by any attempt to explore the connections between the crises of the 1930s and 1940s and the later difficulties of the Belgian nation-state. Processes that worked to stabilise the Belgian polity in the aftermath of national upheaval contributed to the subsequent instability of that same polity. That this should at first sight seem paradoxical is, however, perhaps a consequence of the ways in which we have become accustomed to approaching the history of Belgium in terms of discrete (and value-laden) processes of success and failure. In fact, as was the case with all projects of European nation-state building, the dialectics of conflict and convergence occurred simultaneously. For at least the first hundred years of its existence, the net outcome of these processes was to reinforce the bonds between the citizens, regions and ideological traditions of Belgium; but between the moment of its centenary and the conflicts of the 1960s, net profit turned at first imperceptibly and then more visibly into a net deficit. By studying the resilience of the mid-century Belgian nation-state we are therefore also studying its subsequent difficulties.

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#### ABBREVIATIONS

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|            |   |
|------------|---|
| CEGES/SOMA | Centre d'études et de documentation Guerre et Sociétés contemporaines/<br>Studie- en Documentatiecentrum oorlog en Hedendaagse Maatschappij |
| CVP-PSC    | Christelijke Volkspartij-Parti Social Chrétien  |
| FI/OF      | Front de l'Indépendance/Onafhankelijkheidsfront   |
| PSB/BSP    | Parti Socialiste Belge/Belgische Socialistische Partij  |
| UDB        | Union Démocratique Belge  |
| VNV        | Vlaams Nationaal Verbond  |

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*Het Belfort*

*Indépendance*

*La Cité Nouvelle*

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*Le Monde du Travail*

*Le Perron*

*Le Peuple*

*Vers l'Avenir*

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## **België in het midden van de twintigste eeuw. Een natiestaat in crisis?**

MARTIN CONWAY

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### SAMENVATTING

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Wanneer 'was' België? Dit artikel onderzoekt de relatie tussen de crisis van de Belgische natiestaat, zoals die in de jaren 1960 overduidelijk aan de oppervlakte kwam, en de politieke en sociale onrust van de jaren 1930 en 1940. Daarbij keert het zich tegen diegenen die beweren dat de daaropvolgende problemen van het Belgische staatsbestel ofwel onvermijdelijk waren, ofwel het loutere gevolg van de ontwikkeling van regionale nationalismen. Dit artikel betoogt dat het ging om een complexer proces dat samenhang met de starheid van de staatsstructuren en de mislukking van de gevestigde politieke families, met name de katholieke en de socialistische, om tot een voor hun achterban aanvaardbaar compromis te komen. Deze 'anationalistische' aanpak dwingt ons nadrukkelijker te focussen op de 'herstichting' van de Belgische natiestaat, die zich doorheen de gebeurtenissen van de jaren dertig en veertig manifesteerde, en meer bepaald op de manier waarop het nieuwe politieke en sociale vergelijk minstens ten dele bijdroeg tot de daaropvolgende gebeurtenissen. In het bijzonder vestig ik de aandacht op drie gevolgen van deze decennia in het midden van de eeuw die een aanzienlijke impact hadden op middenlange termijn. Ten eerste, de oorlogsjaren herdefinieerden het Belgische patriottisme, dat 'Belg-zijn' associeerde met de politieke en constitutionele orde belichaamd in de grondwet van 1831. Het gevolg hiervan was dat heel wat politieke hervormingsprojecten van het voorgaande decennium hun momentum verloren. Ten tweede, de 'herstichting' van de Belgische staat was gebaseerd op de conservatieve zuilen van de katholieke en de socialistische partij. Andere politieke bewegingen verdwenen niet, maar hun aanwezigheid op de Belgische politieke scène werd tot een minimum herleid. Ten derde, de woelige periode van het midden van de jaren 1930 tot en met de culminatie van de Koningskwestie in 1950-1951 toonde overduidelijk aan dat de Belgische politieke elites in staat waren complexe compromissen van nationale eenheid te bereiken in crisismomenten. Deze gedeelde politieke besluitvormingscultuur binnen een essentieel parlementaire omgeving werd echter ernstig verzwakt door de gebeurtenissen van die jaren. Het werd moeilijk gelijkaardige oplossingen te vinden voor de problemen waarop de Belgische staat

daarna botste. De daaropvolgende problemen van de natiestaat vloeiden niet onvermijdelijk voort uit de gezamenlijke impact van deze drie thema's, maar ze bieden ons wel een conceptueel frame waarmee we het desintegratieproces als een historisch fenomeen kunnen begrijpen.

## **La Belgique au milieu du vingtième siècle. Un État-Nation en crise?**

MARTIN CONWAY

### RÉSUMÉ

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Quand la Belgique a-t-elle existé? Le présent article se penche sur les liens entre, d'une part, la crise de l'État-Nation belge, telle qu'elle apparaît dans les années 1960 et les désordres politiques et sociaux des années 1930 et 1940, d'autre part. Il conteste, ainsi, l'affirmation de ceux qui prétendent que les problèmes du régime belge qui ont suivi étaient soit inévitables, soit la simple conséquence du développement des nationalismes régionaux. Notre étude démontre, en effet, que le processus est bien plus complexe. Non seulement, la rigidité des structures étatiques entre en ligne de compte, mais aussi, l'incapacité des familles politiques établies, à savoir les partis catholique et socialiste, d'arriver à un compromis acceptable pour leurs bases respectives. L'approche 'non nationaliste' exige, à mon avis, une analyse plus en profondeur de la 're-fondation' de l'État-Nation belge lors des événements de 1930 et 1940. Il s'agit plus précisément d'étudier la manière dont les arrangements politique et social ont contribué, du moins en partie, aux événements qui en ont résulté. J'attire particulièrement l'attention sur trois conséquences issues des décennies du milieu du siècle dont l'impact sur le moyen terme est considérable. La première d'entre elles concerne la manière dont les années de guerre mènent à une redéfinition du patriotisme belge. Ce dernier associe le sentiment aigu de belgitude à un ordre politique et constitutionnel enraciné dans la constitution de 1831. L'abandon de maints projets de réforme politique, dont la nécessité était évidente dans les décades antérieures à la guerre, en est le résultat. La deuxième conséquence vise la façon dont les années 1930 et 1940 engendrent la ré-institution de l'État belge fondé sur les deux

piliers conservateurs des partis catholique et socialiste. Certes, les autres mouvements politiques ne disparaissent pas, mais leur présence sur la scène politique belge se réduit à une peau de chagrin. Enfin, la période troublée du milieu des années 1930 à la fin de la Question royale, en 1951-1952, montre à suffisance la capacité des élites politiques belges à élaborer des compromis complexes, en temps de crise, dans le but de sauvegarder l'unité nationale. Toutefois, ces événements ont sérieusement battu en brèche la culture politique commune de prise de décision au sein d'un environnement essentiellement parlementaire. La difficulté de trouver des solutions similaires aux problèmes rencontrés ultérieurement par l'État belge en est certainement tributaire. Elle ne découle pas inévitablement de l'impact commun des trois thèmes énoncés, mais ceux-ci peuvent fournir un modèle conceptuel permettant d'appréhender le processus de désintégration en tant que phénomène historique.